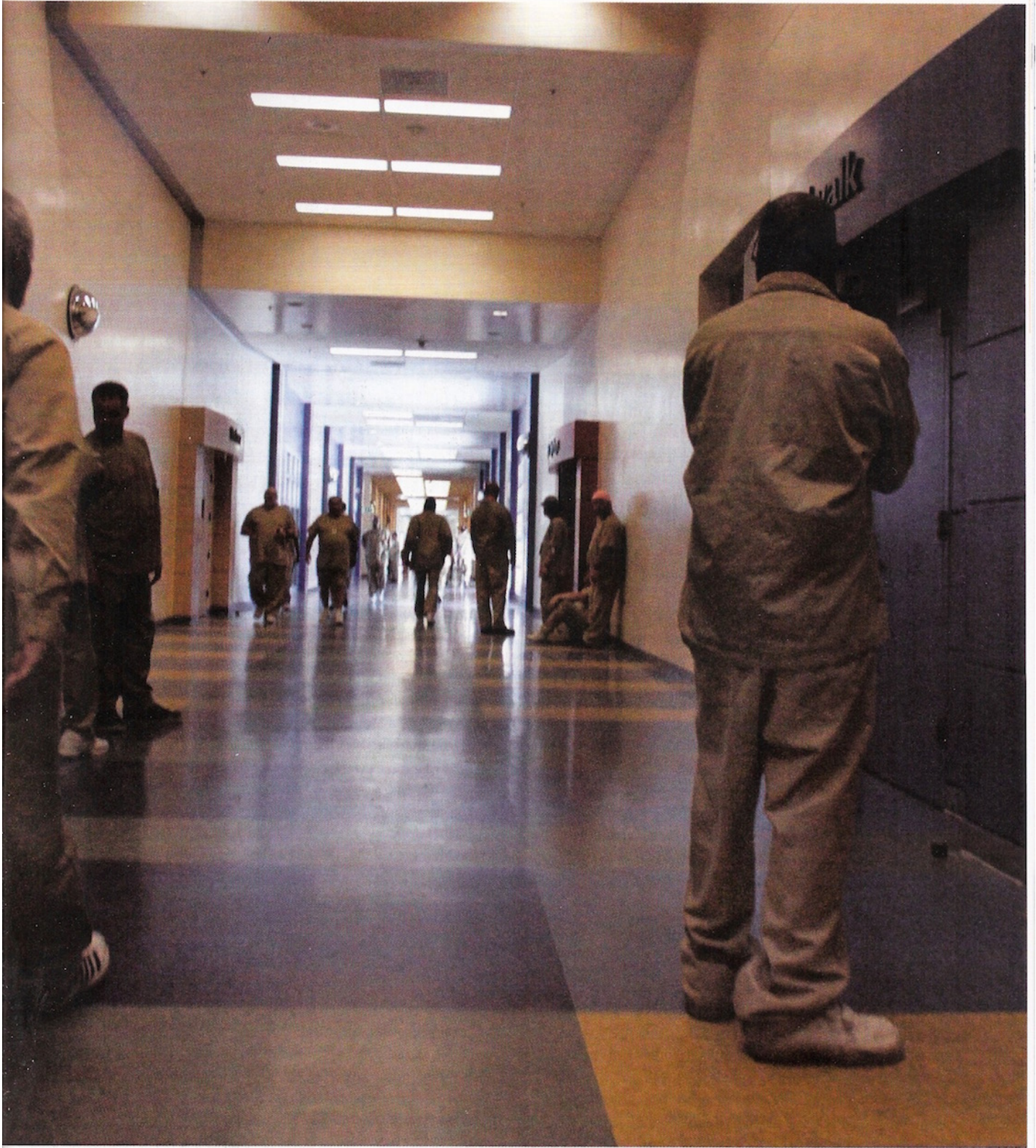


The **OUTCAST** *at the* **GATE**

After a child molester has been set free, where does he go? And how can society ensure that he never strikes again? One program's answer flies against our every instinct: Welcome him back.

By **ALASTAIR GEE**





The Coalinga State Hospital is a 1,500-bed facility that sits on an arid plain near the geographic center of California, far from any major cities. Its isolation is telling. Set behind imposing fences that bear a likeness to those of Pleasant Valley State Prison, just next door, Coalinga, which opened in 2005 at a cost of nearly \$400 million, is where the state houses its most dangerous male sexual offenders after they have served time in prison.

When the state of California deems a prisoner who has committed certain violent sex crimes likely to reoffend upon his release, the courts can commit him to Coalinga for an indeterminate length of time. If he ever wishes to be set free, a patient there can mount a legal challenge to his commitment or choose to undergo a rigorous course of therapy and testing. In the latter scenario, the hospital uses various tools to ascertain the likelihood of his reoffending, including actuarial risk assessments and phallometric testing, which measures blood flow to the penis when patients are exposed to sexual imagery. Many patients decline to run this gauntlet. Life at Coalinga has its comforts, among them a common area with a barbershop and a restaurant called the Patient Mall. Patients can also take classes in badminton, ceramics, and art therapy. But a gilded cage is still a cage, and some patients are determined to secure their release.

One day in November of 2009, a 52-year-old man—we'll call him Richard—woke up to his last morning at Coalinga. A compact figure with small eyes and an unlined, round face that makes him look younger than his age, Richard came to Coalinga not long after it began receiving patients. By the time of his release, which he had won after both pursuing treatment and making a court challenge, he had been locked up for 17 years for sexually abusing children.

On his final morning at Coalinga, Richard waited anxiously to be escorted to the exit. He was eventually led to a

police cruiser, which drove him to a parking lot. When he stepped out of the cruiser and looked beyond the cars in the lot, he saw nothing but empty land for miles. Bare hills rose in the distance. The freedom was bewildering.

Richard had no family nearby. But nonetheless a small maroon SUV was there to pick him up in the parking lot. At the wheel was a Mennonite pastor from Fresno named Clare Ann Ruth-Heffelbower, who had been waiting for Richard for some hours. Ruth-Heffelbower works with a program devoted to reintegrating sex offenders into society. It's called Circles of Support and Accountability, or COSA.

Ruth-Heffelbower created a local COSA program in part for religious reasons: She sees Jesus's work with lepers—outcasts considered untouchable—as a model for what she's doing. So does her husband, Duane, who is also a Mennonite pastor. "If Jesus were here," he says, "he'd probably be working with pedophiles, because they're today's lepers." Though motivated substantially by faith, Clare Ann's work with sex offenders is also grounded in a set of empirical understandings that a number of researchers have come to accept in recent years with regard to men like Richard.

To get to Coalinga, Ruth-Heffelbower had driven 60 miles across California's agricultural and politically conservative Central Valley. After picking Richard up, she took him to a fast-food restaurant for his first meal on the outside: a cheeseburger with fries and a large Coke. Then they drove



CONFINED INDEFINITELY
The grounds of Coalinga State Hospital

to the Central Valley city where Richard would be residing, stopping on the way at a warehouse-style grocery store that overwhelmed him with its superabundance of choices. After that, Ruth-Heffelbower dropped Richard off at a rented room she had helped him find, and his life on the outside began.

RICHARD, WHO AGREED to talk if we changed his name, was born in Southern California. His parents divorced when he was small. He and his sisters were raised by their mother, a medical technician and devout Christian, and he was shepherded to church twice each Sunday. Richard does not speak resentfully of his upbringing, and recalls bright, unfringed times: baseball and football games with neighborhood kids, and adventures around railroad tracks and the concrete banks of the Los Angeles River. He formed a happy bond with a church youth leader, who took him fishing and on a summer road trip. His mother, who still lives in California, remembers him fondly as a responsible, caring child—"a dear little boy." But he became less social, she remembers, when he got to high school. "He just kind of closed up," she says. "That's not a good sign for young kids."

As a teenager, Richard dated several girls his own age, and was even reprimanded by youth group leaders for being too amorous with one of them. But during those same years he began to molest young children. Richard claims he didn't

realize his acts were harmful or even proscribed. "I don't remember dwelling on it very much," he says. "I guess it didn't really dawn on me until the first time I got in trouble, when I was 21, that it was illegal."

By his own account, some of which was confirmed by his mother, Richard abused his own niece and nephew, then aged 5 or 6, while he was in his teens or early 20s. He says his sister discovered him in the act with her son, but for some reason did not report him. "I can't imagine what they've gone through," Richard's mother says of her grandchildren. "They don't tell me, and they don't talk about it. If they had their way, he would just be left in some garbage dump to rot away, I think. I don't know what they think, actually, except they were damaged by that, of course."

Richard abused others during that period. As he describes it, he "fondled and orally copulated" a boy aged about 10, whom he knew from his church. The boy's mother didn't press charges, he says, possibly because her family knew Richard's. "I didn't know what to do," Richard's mother recalls. "If I could have just done something to make it easier for them. But I didn't know what to do."

At the age of 27, Richard told me, he was finally arrested and sent to prison, for repeatedly molesting his roommate's stepdaughter. He says he served 20 months and was placed in therapy upon his release, but he soon stopped going, and eventually began abusing children again. In 1992, when he

was 35, a case was brought against him after he molested two boys, aged around 9 or 10, one of whom he had lured to his apartment with the promise of playing Nintendo. Court records show that this time he received a 13-year sentence, for oral sex and lewd acts with minors.

In 1999, having served half of his sentence, Richard became eligible for release. But by then California had passed a civil-commitment law that applied to anyone who had committed certain sexual offenses against two or more victims, and who had a diagnosis of a mental disorder that put him at a high risk of reoffending. The state brought a case against Richard, and he spent the next decade in mental hospitals.

The treatment regimen at Coalinga—which Richard assented to—requires patients to accept the magnitude of their crimes and identify their triggers for offending. No hint of self-justification, along the lines of “the victim wanted me to do it,” is tolerated. During his therapy, Richard says, he came up with charts, tables, and detailed schemas of how exactly he committed his crimes. He wrote letters—never sent—to each of his victims. His view of his own offenses became stark. He recalls one therapist telling him, “You must continue to think of yourself as being a type of ogre, okay? In a sense a kind of murderer.” This was perhaps when Richard picked up the clinical language he uses to speak of himself and his crimes: He employs such terms as “juvenile” and “age-inappropriate relations.”

Richard did not fully complete the therapy program at Coalinga, but several specialists judged that he no longer posed enough of a risk to warrant being committed. Richard had developed a reputation for being particularly “treatment oriented,” says his public defender. So in 2009 a court ordered his release.

AROUND 800,000 registered sex offenders live in the United States, according to an estimate by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. Many sex crimes go unreported, so it’s hard to say for certain what the sexual recidivism rate is. A 2004 survey of Canadian, American, and British sex offenders found that 24 percent commit another act of abuse within 15 years of being released from prison. Sex offenders who are deemed by the courts to pose too high a risk, says Fabian Saleh, an assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, require “a structured, locked setting.”

To that end, 20 states provide for indefinite civil commitment at mental hospitals like Coalinga, and inmates in federal prisons can also be confined in this way upon their release. The practice has come in for criticism, frequently over its expense: In California, each civil-commitment patient costs taxpayers \$200,000 a year, whereas prison inmates cost roughly \$60,000. But the reality is that not many offenders

end up in civil-commitment programs. Between 1996 and 2013, only about 3 percent of offenders convicted of certain sexually violent crimes were civilly committed upon their release from prison. By 2013, more than a third of them had won releases, mostly through legal challenges.

The states mainly attempt to manage sex offenders in other ways. All have sex offender registries that are accessible to the public, and many places bar released offenders from residing within distances of up to 2,500 feet from places where children congregate, such as schools. But according to a major 2014 report on sex offender management commissioned by the U.S. Department of Justice, registries have “mixed” results. And while residency restrictions offer communities a sense of security, they don’t appear to have much effect. In 2008, Iowa’s Department of Criminal and Juvenile Justice Planning declared that the state’s residency restrictions had served little purpose. The 2014 national report recommended against the use of such restrictions. “They don’t work in protecting children or preventing recidivism,” says Jill Levenson, a former Child Protective Services investigator who researches sex offender legislation at Barry University, near Miami. “All the laws really do is regulate where somebody sleeps at night, but they really don’t regulate where a sex offender might go during the day.”

Residency restrictions, it turns out, could even be counterproductive. “In densely populated communities,” Levenson says, “there aren’t very many dwellings outside buffer zones,” and the result may be that some sex offenders are “legislated into homelessness,” with all the instability that entails, or are compelled to reside in places with few jobs. An extreme case occurred in Miami in the late 2000s when, to avoid violating a local 2,500-foot rule, dozens of sex offenders were forced to live in a tent camp under a causeway. The policy can end up being one of *de facto* ostracism. And yet reoffending is least likely, Levenson says, when offenders manage to find stable places of residence and employment in their communities and enjoy social support.

This is why COSA programs focus on helping sex offenders to reestablish themselves in normal society. But finding stable employment and social moorings for modern-day pariahs is, it turns out, no small feat.

COSA HAS GAINED PROMINENCE recently in the United States, but it has been around for two decades in Canada. It originated in 1993, when an Ontario prison psychologist, concerned about a repeat sex offender named Charlie Taylor, contacted Harry Nigh, a Mennonite pastor who had run a prison-visitation program. Taylor was about to be released after his latest stint inside, and the psychologist wondered whether Nigh might be able to help prevent another, perhaps by putting Taylor out of the way, on a farm owned by Mennonites.

Robin Wilson likens the work COSA does to reattachment therapy. Often, he says, offenders “become detached from society, or perhaps were never properly attached in first place,” and as a result don’t care about the consequences of their actions.

That wasn't feasible. But it gave Nigh an idea. What if he and a few other volunteers created a community support group, or circle, for Taylor? "I knew if no one was there, another child was gonna get hurt," Nigh says, "and he'd spend the rest of his life in prison." His own motivations were, like those of Ruth-Heffelbower, partly religious. "Jesus said you don't return evil for evil," he says. "You return good for evil."

The local police expected Taylor to reoffend, Nigh says. They put him under 24-hour surveillance and showed his picture to schoolchildren in the area. With a group of six or seven volunteers from the community, Nigh met with Taylor at least once a week, helping him navigate civilian life and talking with him about his past and his crimes. Someone telephoned him every day. Taylor stayed out of trouble, and six weeks later the police ended their surveillance. Impressed, detectives asked Nigh whether he could set up similar circles for other released offenders. Taylor continued to work with Nigh's group for the rest of his life. He died 12 years after his release without having offended again.

The program caught on. Today, high-risk sex offenders due for release from Canadian prisons are referred to COSA groups—which have begun to take hold in the United States, too, with some groups receiving funding from correctional services in states including Minnesota and Vermont. In this country the groups are somewhat autonomous, but all have established relationships with local prisons, parole officers, or hospitals, and most take general guidance from Robin J. Wilson, the former clinical director at Florida's

civil-commitment facility, and Andrew McWhinnie, a therapist and consultant for Canada's COSA groups.

COSA programs form part of a new trend in sex offender management. In the words of Ian Elliott, a forensic research psychologist who has received funding from the National Institute of Justice to study COSA, the aim today is to "produce pro-social people, as opposed to just well-managed people"—to encourage people to avoid reoffending not because they are afraid of the legal consequences, but because they recognize the harm their actions can cause others and themselves. COSA circles tend to focus on practical and lifestyle issues: how to get a job, make friends, and recognize a drift toward reoffending. COSA guidelines suggest that a volunteer from the group be in touch with an offender every day for the first few weeks after his release, and that the whole group meet at frequent intervals. Studies suggest that COSA can reduce sexual recidivism by about 60 to 80 percent, although the quality of those studies, Elliott points out, varies. The 2014 U.S. Department of Justice-commissioned report called the early findings about COSA "encouraging."

Wilson likens COSA to reattachment therapy. Often, he says, offenders "become detached from society, or perhaps were never properly attached in first place," and as a result don't care about the consequences of their actions. But surrounding them with people who take an interest in their lives can initiate a shift. The offenders find that they have friends and opportunities, not just freedom, to lose. "They've got people who care about them," Wilson says. "They're starting to experience some successes, they may have a job for the first time in ages, they may have a decent place to live."

I FIRST VISITED Richard's COSA circle in the spring of 2011, when it had been meeting for about a year and a half. We gathered at 8:30 a.m. in a bare room at a suburban Mennonite church. Members sat on folding chairs nursing cups of coffee.

The group had practical matters to discuss with Richard. Chief among them, said one member, an avuncular retired social worker, was "where's he going to go so he doesn't end up on the street." Richard had run through his savings—around \$20,000—paying for rent, therapy, and a \$3,000 pharmacy-technician course. Before he began the course, Ruth-Heffelbower had called the state's pharmacy board to ask if sex offenders could be licensed, and was told that decisions were made on a case-by-case basis. After completing the course, Richard was denied because of his criminal record. He had applied for numerous jobs, but the application forms usually asked about prior offenses, and in any case background checks would always pull up his past. Plus the Central Valley region itself was a tough place for anybody to be looking for work: In the wake of the recession, the area had one of the country's highest unemployment rates.

Richard told the group that he had taken to massaging his resume out of desperation. Although he had last worked in 1992, before he was imprisoned, he now said on his resume that his most recent job was in 2005. The group struggled with this. They agreed that he shouldn't dissimulate about his offenses if asked, but beyond that, the rights and wrongs of the situation got hazier. "I'm not saying I think it's okay just to lie," said another member, a thoughtful woman, also a retiree. "But I do think society has made things so hard for some people that I can understand it."

That afternoon I went to see Richard at his house, which he was at risk of soon being unable to afford. He looked oddly boyish as he waited for me outside, in a pair of shorts and with socks pulled up to his knees. He shared the house with two other men. It was a dingy place with a ripe, cloying smell, but it offered Richard a feeling of independence and community that he savored. He mentioned a time a cat had gotten stuck in a tree outside. When the firefighters came, he'd watched with his neighbors as they coaxed it down. He had enjoyed that moment—it gave him a fleeting sense of belonging.

Still, he was on constant guard against himself. He had a television, but he avoided watching shows featuring children. He told himself he should never attempt to start a conversation with kids and never to allow himself to be alone with them. Once, he heard some children outside, so he shut his door. Mentally, he had lapses: He had masturbated to memories of his abuse of children, although he did then report this to his COSA group. Richard feels he has to be completely honest with his circle. Doing so, he says, keeps him from slipping into a potentially dangerous mindset that involves keeping secrets and ruminating.

WHEN I STOPPED BY Richard's circle again, in late 2012, he was still without a job and was spending his nights in a sleeping bag on a scruffy pedestrian mall. It wasn't obvious that he was homeless, because in the mornings he brushed his teeth and washed his hair using a drinking fountain. For breakfast every day he had coffee and a bag of day-old donuts, and for lunch and dinner he made do with a single sandwich. He didn't have money for anything else. He had been robbed.

Richard seemed upbeat despite his situation. But there were glimmers of frustration, and maybe even despair, among the volunteers at the meeting. An employment agency had emailed Richard about a full-time job opening, but because the workplace wasn't located on a public bus line, Richard hadn't gone for it. That seemed to irk Ruth-Heffelbower, who told him that sometimes "you just have to leap out and say, 'Yeah, I can do it,' and figure it out later." Richard conceded that maybe she was right.

After the meeting concluded and Richard left, the others stayed behind to discuss his situation. They cared for him but were becoming exasperated. Owing to the shame Richard felt over his crimes, and his unwillingness to go beyond his narrow comfort zone, progress was slow. During the meetings, they said, he agreed to their suggestions, but then didn't follow through. He wouldn't take a shower regularly, even though he had a way to do so. He refused to apply for a job as a sign twirler because he didn't like the idea of being conspicuous to so many people on the street. One of the volunteers, a convicted sex offender himself, sympathized with Richard on that score. "It's hard to make yourself visible when you want so much to disappear," he said. "He's doing everything he can to protect himself, to the point where he's almost hurting himself."

The retired social worker said he'd recently caught a glimpse of what really seemed to motivate Richard. The insight had come during the group's discussion of a homeless shelter where Richard would have been able to stay if he had acceded to its lengthy list of rules. But Richard didn't like the rules. "I want my *freedom*," he'd said plaintively, by way of explanation. For Richard, the volunteer realized, staying at the shelter would have been too much like living in prison or a place like Coalinga. Feeling free was so important to Richard, the volunteer said, that he was willing to sleep in the rain.

Talking with me in the park later, with other indigents loitering and cops occasionally walking past, Richard echoed much the same idea. "I feel like I'm a little more in control of my life," he said, "even though I'm homeless."

IF COSA WERE DESIGNED solely to help offenders reintegrate into society and build successful new lives, it would be hard to judge it a triumph in Richard's case. When I saw him next, in 2013, his prolonged job search had still

Richard refused to apply for a job as a sign twirler because he didn't like the idea of being conspicuous to so many people on the street. A fellow sex offender sympathized: "It's hard to make yourself visible when you want so much to disappear."

come to nothing, and at times he seemed locked in a loop of frustration and self-reproach. The final time I visited him, in 2014, he remained homeless and had been beaten by men he encountered on the streets on several occasions.

Ruth-Heffelbower acknowledges that helping Richard reintegrate is tough. "Many times," she says, the group "feels like it's treading water." But the group has achieved at least the minimum definition of success: it has kept Richard socially connected and accountable; and he hasn't reoffended. Richard himself gives COSA some credit for this. He cites one particular event, from about a year and a half ago, as emblematic of what the group has done for him. He was in the bathroom of a Walmart one day when a boy, under 10 years old, walked in and struck up a conversation. "I don't remember even at the time consciously thinking that I would like to have sexual relations with him," Richard says. "I did think that because he was nice, he was sort of cute, that maybe if I hung around there long enough, well, then those thoughts or feelings might come." At that point, Richard recognized that he had to leave—and he did.

Later, he talked openly with his COSA circle about the encounter. Had the circle of volunteers not been there, he says, he might have slipped into what he calls "offending mode" after the encounter: With nobody to turn to for help, he might have begun brooding on what he could have done to the boy and then might have acted on those thoughts with a different child.

None of this is to say that Richard feels cured of what he himself describes as an affliction. Far from it. He likens his predilections to a cancer that can, at best, with the help of COSA, be kept in remission. That modest prospect is enough to keep Ruth-Heffelbower and her colleagues going. "We're in this," she says, "for the long run."

COSA is built on the idea that we can best protect ourselves against sex offenders by integrating them into society. In the end, this notion may be as much a sticking point as it is a solution. Men like Richard are socially isolated precisely because of the stigma and revulsion that their crimes inspire. Even when he is surrounded by COSA volunteers who—through faith, commitment, or generosity of spirit—are willing to sit in a room with him every week, Richard is held in check, at times, by his own internalized sense of stigma. "When it comes to sexually offending," he told me once, "yes, I'm a monster."

Still, aside from one man who committed an assault after he chose to leave his circle, none of the 60 men who have been in Ruth-Heffelbower's groups over the years is known to have reoffended. Unless we decide to lock up all such offenders indefinitely, programs like COSA may be the best we can do. ★

Alastair Gee, a writer based in San Francisco, has written for The Economist, The New Yorker online, The New York Times, and other publications.